Encountering the Niobe's Children: Vernon Lee's Queer Formalism and the Empathy of Sculpture[1]

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Introduction: The Aesthetics of the Past

A renowned Renaissance scholar and critic, Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) occupies a special place in the historiography of art and cultural history not so much for her discoveries about the past, but for the way in which she used the past. What Goethe once said about Winckelmann should be valid for Lee as well: in reading her essays on art one learns nothing, but one becomes something.[2] Lee's use of the past is essential to understand what history meant to the late Victorians, but also how the past enabled them to think about their modernity. Since 1895, Lee's interests as a historian moved towards contemporary discussions about psychophysiological aesthetics to study our bodily responses to the form of ancient statuary. For Lee, the history of art was the history of a human quest for a harmonious balance between the inner self and the outer world, and not the accumulation of facts organized through antiquarian systems. She argued that organic life can be attuned to the form of ancient statuary: "We can live off a beautiful object, we can live by its means".[3] Thus, Lee thought that art could furnish the organism with a tonic experience to enhance life and becoming "intimate with any great work of art" represented a possibility to find "a congruity with *ourselves.*"[4] In her terms, the form of a work of art could be useful to literally style the self in both aesthetic and ethical ways.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Lee started to keep some gallery diaries to annotate her physical responses in front of statues to examine the bodily adjustments occurring in organic functions such as breathing, heartbeat, or the speed of the eye movement. A document of Lee's practice of self-observation, the pages of her gallery diaries also represent an illuminating source to explain how she came to use the statues and produce a modern discourse of sexuality. In a passage of the diaries that builds upon the tradition of the *paragone* between literature and sculpture, Lee suggests that the previous has a "moral power" that the latter lacks:

> The more a statue makes us look at it, the more it holds us by *its* reality, the less *moral* (or immoral) feelings we shall have. These are got largely by substituting the *word* for the *form*. If men have been in love with statues, it is because they have substituted for them the flesh and blood images in their memory. It is in this way that art, by reversing the process and furnishing us with artistic images and emotions to be revived by *real* things — by accustoming us to translate reality into form (instead of form into reality) — can purify and elevate the contents of our consciousness.[5]

[1] This research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. I would like to acknowledge Rowan Bailey, Julia Bryan Wilson, Zorian Clayton, The Drakes, Gordon Hall and Dawn Hoskins for responding with incisive comments to previous versions of this essay.

[2] "Man lernt nichts wenn man ihn lieset, aber man wird etwas," J. P. Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955), 215.

[3] Vernon Lee, "Art and Life I," *Contemporary Review* 69 (May 1896), 666.

[4] Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis. Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), 91.

[5] Vernon Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (London: John Lane, 1912), 266. Italics in the original text.

Here, a Pygmalionic scene that stages the love of statues becomes useful to gain historical access to modern notions of gender and sexuality. The men in the text could be taken almost literally as men, stocking up images in their mind, against whom Lee voices an oblique critique of the social production of the male gaze. Michael Hatt reminds us that, although painting was far more widely represented in the art galleries and in the art press of the nineteenth century, for many artists and critics sculpture remained "the most elevated, moral and beautiful" of the arts.[6] Yet, in the heroic and idealist celebration of the classical nude of late-Victorian criticism, sculpture's moral standards could only be measured by means of an irresolvable erotic tension that statues posed as marble doubles of bodies of flesh.[7] The fact that, in this passage, Lee refuses to look at statues as gendered doubles of the body represents the precondition for the creation of another chain of signification for sculpture. Purified from their association with real bodies, the statues can now be appreciated according to their own language, which is the language of form. Lee is obviously not campaigning for a puritanical position against the idols of marble, but is using the critical language of formalism to free sculpture from the moral imperatives imposed by the mimetic representation of the human body.

Kathy Psomiades has convincingly dismissed the polemic against Lee's puritanism by suggesting that her work on psychological aesthetics, in association with her "tendency to 'intellectualise' love relationships" with her collaborators, must be considered as "less a denial of sexuality than it is a sexual style".[8] In this chapter, I am going to read Lee's engagement with psychophysiological aesthetics and formalism in sculpture along these lines, as an exercise to model the self plastically. Lee's reconfiguration of the human form through the abstract language of formalism, therefore, should be taken as a form of intellectual *asceticism*, germane with Michel Foucault's notion of *askēsis*, often referred to as "the exercise of oneself in the activity of thinking".[9] Exercises are transforming practices, practices by which one undergoes changes. The very aim of the exercise is to alter the practitioner.[10] Ancient statues represented for Lee a special tool to exercise non-conforming ideas about gender and sexuality. In liberating the statue from its natural role as a referent of the human body and as object of art-historical knowledge, Lee created a space for the investigation of modern perceptions of sexuality beyond the gender binary.

In this chapter, I discuss Lee's encounters with statues of Niobids in her writings to show that her harnessing of the language of formalism and psychophysiological theories represented a modernist critique of the antiquarian methods founded on objectivity and accumulation of facts. A popular theme in ancient sculpture, the Niobids group illustrates the killing of the fourteen

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[6] Michael Hatt, "Thoughts and Things: Sculpture and the Victorian Nude," in *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate, 2001), 37-49 (37).
[7] On this regard, see Alex Potts, "Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journa*l 15, no. 2 (1992), 38-47. For an exploration of the queer tensions of sculpture in Britain during the long nineteenth century, see David Getsy, *Body Doubles. Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[8] Kathy Alexis Psomiades, '"Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace': Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21-41 (30).
[9] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 *History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 9.
[10] I take the reading of Foucault's *askēsis* as exercise from Ladelle McWhorter, "Asceticism/*Askēsis*: Foucault's Thinking Historical Subjectivity," in *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought*, eds. Arleen B. Dallery, Charles E. Scott, and P. Holley Robert (Albany: State University of New York Press), 243-54.

children of the queen of Thebes Niobe as a punishment for having hubristically mocked the goddess Leto who had only two children, Apollo and Artemis. In her writings, however, Lee never assesses this sculptural group to corroborate any of the categories of connoisseurship: authorship, period and provenance. Rather, she proposes to invest the pastness of the statues with a modern aesthetic and a sexual imagination which represents one of the most sophisticated experiments in writing about sculpture from the turn of the twentieth century.

The Queer Child of Sculpture

Since Susan Lanzoni sketched out the scientific map of Vernon Lee's work in psychological aesthetics and empathy theories, more scholars have started to engage with a parallel reassessment of her role in the development of formalist criticism and its cultural transformations.[11] However, the first essay in which Lee engaged with formalism predates the psychological work of the 1890s. "The Child in the Vatican" (1881) fosters the importance of a formal and sensorial understanding of ancient statuary which is set in opposition to the dominant antiquarianism of her time. As Jonah Siegel has noted, in that essay Lee "anticipates a modern aesthetic regime in which the formal qualities of artworks will be the measure of their achievement".[12] In this early experiment in formalist art writing, a visit to the Vatican gallery becomes the trigger for a number of considerations on the relationship between the medium of sculpture and history, but also on the relationship between formalist art writing and embodied aesthetics.

This operation required some adjustments of the tradition of sculptural criticism. The essay was much indebted to Walter Pater's aesthetic writings, but in planning her intellectual visit to the Vatican sculpture gallery, Lee was also engaging with a longer queer lineage of male aesthetic thinkers that included Goethe and Winckelmann.[13] As Stefano Evangelista has pointed out, by the time Lee published her essay, the Vatican had become "the theatre for a culturally sanctioned type of lovemaking between the male critic and the male body as represented in ancient statues like the Apollo Belvedere or the Antinous".[14] In order to understand how Lee found her own critical voice among this male homosocial literature, we need to consider the role of the child in the text.

Evangelista has suggested that, in line with the German Romantic tradition of Schiller and Hegel who saw the Greeks as "the children of humanity in an evolutionary history of European culture", Lee's child becomes the embodiment of the childhood of art.[15] But the little visitor of the Vatican gallery also reminds us of eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the

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[11] Susan Lanzoni, "Practicing Psychology in the Art Gallery: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics of Empathy," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2009), 330–54; Carolyn Burdett, "The Subjective Inside Us Can Turn into the Objective Outside': Vernon Lee's Psychological Aesthetics," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 12 (2011), n.p.; Kirsty Martin, *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy. Vernon Lee, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Benjamin Morgan, "Critical Empathy: Vernon Lee's Aesthetics and the Origins of Close Reading," *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 1 (2012), 31-56.
[12] Jonah Siegel, "The Material of Form: Vernon Lee at the Vatican and Out of It," *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 2 (2013), 189-201 (199).
[13] Scholars have already noted that Lee's essay is intertextually connected to Pater's 'Child in the House' (1878). Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece. Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 56.
[14] Stefano Evangelista, "Vernon Lee in the Vatican: The Uneasy Alliance of Aestheticism and Archaeology," *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 1 (2009), 31-41 (38).
[15] Evangelista, *British Aestheticism*, 61.

romantic child, whose aesthetic sensitivities are yet unspoiled by modern education. Unable to read the statues, Lee's child is only attracted to their form and colour. Thus, the encounter with the child allows Lee to reflect on the silent art of sculpture as the conduit for a formalist aesthetics of perception:

> To the child, the modern child, it [sculpture] is speechless; it knows not a word of the language understood by the child's fancy […] The child does not recognise in it anything familiar: these naked, or half naked, limbs are things which the child has never seen, at least, never observed; they do not, in their unfamiliarity, their vagueness, constitute an individual character […]; but in these vague, white things, with their rounded white check, and clotted white hair, with their fold of white drapery about them, the child recognises nothing: men? women? it does not ask: for it, they are mere things, figures cut out of stone.[16]

Lee's child can only be gender neutral like the statues it inquisitively beholds. Neither men, nor women, the statues are not perceived by the child as gendered body doubles; they are just "mere things". The whiteness of the marbles in the Vatican points to the blankness of meaning which they embody and becomes symptomatic of their queer capacity. The child does not feel any compulsion to follow the script of gender before the sculptures. Statues are not meaning petrified, nor are they hieroglyphs to be deciphered, but their historical knowledge is immanent to their materiality: "the only intrinsic perfection of art is the perfection of form, and that such perfection is obtainable only by boldly altering, or even casting aside, the subject with which this form is only imaginatively, most often arbitrarily, connected".[17]

Lee not only disregards the relationship between form and content in the history of sculpture, but also the relationship between artworks and collections established by the modern apparati of connoisseurship and curatorship. In fact, the main sculpture discussed in "The Child in the Vatican" is the group of the Niobids scattered across two Roman Museums, the Uffizi and the Munich Glyptothek. In 1876, the afflicted facial expression of Niobe had already attracted the scientific curiosity of Duchenne de Boulogne who used a cast of the Uffizi type to illustrate his electrophysiological experiments on the *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine* (fig. 1).[18] Instead Lee chose to point to the pathetic and expressive connotations of the Niobids only to dismiss them. All the clutching, writhing and grimacing with convulsed agony that we imagine in the story, she writes, disappears when the artist translates these ideas into form.[19] While the philosophical reference of Lee's aesthetics is obviously derived from Pater, her methodological model implies a reorganisation of the visual relationship between object and beholder, for gallery visitors too "forget" the subject of the sculptural group as soon as they start to focus on the form of the action: "For the more intense becomes our perception of the form, the vaguer becomes our recollection of the subject […] We are no longer feeling emotion; we are merely perceiving beauty".[20] The formalist objective of the essay also contains an intrinsic critique of the empirical methods of evaluation in art history. Lee complains that the statues' own language has been stifled and even obfuscated by the cognoscenti who wrote about them. The statues, Lee sardonically writes, "who have never read Winckelmann, nor Quatremère, nor Otfried Müller, do not know all these

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[16] Vernon Lee, "The Child in the Vatican," in *Belcaro: Being Studies on Sundry Aesthetic Questions* (London: W. Satchell, 1881), 17-48 (20).
[17] Lee, "The Child," 48.
[18] Guillaume-Benjamin-Amand Duchenne de Boulogne, *Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine ou Analyse Électro-Physiologique de l'Expression des Passions* (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1876).
[19] Lee, "The Child," 43.
[20] Lee, "The Child," 34.

wondrous classifications of schools".[21] The passage seems to suggest that readers of the essay will learn nothing about the Niobids as an object of art history; instead, they are invited to unlearn art history.

Place Figure 1 here.

Lee's child has a special relationship with senses other than the visual which only exacerbates its ability to read the statues: "this fancy language of our modern child is the language of colour, of movement, of sound, of suggestion, of all the broken words of modern thought and feeling: and the statue has none of these".[22] The child would have the sense of touch in common with the statues, except the modern museum does not allow it to touch. Pater had already described Winckelmann's probing of pre-Christian statuary as "shameless and childlike"; his fingers were represented as the conduits to the lost world of antiquity.[23] The condition of alienation of the statues, artificially arranged in the museum like dead specimens, becomes paradigmatic of "the failure of the medium itself to mean in modernity".[24] As Siegel has put it, "The Child in the Vatican" represents a "modernist romance of lost authenticity".[25]

The statues are also physically fragmented, a condition that becomes paradigmatic of the fragmentation of their meaning to the modern viewer. Rather than attempting an archeological reconstruction of the objects according to a nostalgic antiquarianism, Lee embraces the materiality of the statues in the present to produce a formalist and intertextual analysis irrespective of historical consistency. Lee was obviously in agreement with Winckelmann's perception that the historical meaning of the statues was irretrievably lost. However, she never allowed mourning to become the narrative mood for a historical system.[26] While the meaning of the statue may be forever lost, its formal and aesthetic qualities can still give us access to the "instinctively imperious artistic aim" of the sculptor to create beautiful form.[27] The sculptor of the Niobe, Lee explains, has deliberately "selected among the attitudes and gestures and expressions suggested to him by this scene, rejected those which were inherently ugly and accepted those which were intrinsically beautiful".[28] Thus, when viewers look at the sculptural group of the Niobids, they too reactivate, with their senses, the formal choices originally made by the sculptor. A liminal object between past and present, the statue becomes a tool by which the aesthetic instinct of the artist and ours meet across history.

The modernity of Lee's aesthetic imperative, and its romantic universalist undertones, can only be fully appreciated in opposition to the dominant discourse of antiquarianism that her formalist analysis was explicitly challenging through the figure of the child. Indeed, the modernity of the child becomes proportional to the primitivist fantasies it embodies. The child is "barbarous" because it does not know how to make sense of the statues, nor can it read about them. However, there is also another sense in which the adjective "barbarous" resonates with a primitivist tradition about the sense of touch, the lower sense in the scale of evolutionary aesthetics. Touch is the first sense developed in the animal world. Even before nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking, many

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[21] Lee, "The Child," 29.
[22] Lee, "The Child," 20.
[23] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance. Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 142.
[24] Siegel, "The Material of Form," 194.
[25] Siegel, "The Material of Form," 193.
[26] Whitney Davis, "Winckelmann Divided: Mourning the Death of Art History," *The Journal of Homosexuality* 27, no. 1-2 (1994), 141-60.
[27] Lee, "The Child,", 44.
[28] Lee, "The Child," 46.

aesthetic systems considered touch as the most primitive sense by which art historians started to explain how sculpture must have preceded all the other arts in teaching us how to embody form and perceive space. According to Aloïs Riegl's evolutionary theory of art history, for instance, touch was older than vision, which instead afforded a higher degree of rationalisation of space. Riegl considered Egyptian art, for instance, as the result of a primitive apprehension of space in which it was impossible to separate individual objects: "the Egyptians were like small children learning to focus".[29] When she wrote about ancient statuary or the Renaissance, Lee complied with the dominant historiographical model that attributed a primal position to sculpture in the development of art history.

In "The Child in the Vatican", Lee was clear on the position of sculpture in the history of the senses: "humanity knew beauty in the statue before knowing beauty in the picture, and beauty in the picture before beauty in music. The first standard of artistic right and wrong was the standard of sculpture".[30] Like Riegl, Lee believed touch to be less literal than vision and to have survived the many stages of western aesthetic civilisation. Unlike Riegl, however, she did not consider touch as a subset of vision, because Lee was never interested in a visual theory of beauty: "for beauty of form has a double origin: it is not only an intellectual conception, but also a physical embodiment".[31] Thus, her denigration of visuality must be read in conjunction to her critique of antiquarian methods and as an opening to the physiological experience of sculpture both forming and formed by beauty.

The child's polymorphous sensoriality is not aligned with the aesthetic hierarchies that organise art history's temporality according to a continuous development from the haptic to the optic sense. While the vertical history of the senses should evolve from touch to vision, Lee's child seems stuck in a sensorial circularity between touch and sound, anticipating the Freudian concept of "arrested development" which may link the child's barbarousness to one account about the phylogenesis of homosexuality.[32] The horizontality of sensorial relations suggested by her formalist analysis thus invites us to read the child as a queer figure that refuses to grow up into adulthood, but grows, instead, sideways.[33] The "fairy tale" of the child, as Lee calls it, explains that the child's aesthetic *Bildung* is not granted from its moving away from the language of the statues, but by the continual return to "those drowsy years of childish passion and day dreams" in which the child "learned something which others did not know".[34] Like the statues in the Vatican which do not appear to the child according to the classifications of art history, the senses are not organised vertically according to a progressive evolution: touch and sound are siblings.

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[29] Aloïs Riegl, *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (1901) quoted in Fiona Candlin, "The Dubious Inheritance of Touch: Art History and Museum Access," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (2006), 137-54 (140).
[30] Lee, "The Child," 28.
[31] Lee, "The Child," 46.
[32] Neville Hoad, "Arrested Development or the Queerness of Savages: Resisting Evolutionary Narratives of Difference," *Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 2 (2000), 133-58. See also Jana Funke, "Navigating the Past: Sexuality, Race and the Uses of the Primitive in Magnus Hirschfeld's Travel Writings," in Fisher and Rebecca Langlands, eds, *Sex, Knowledge, and Receptions of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111-34.
[33] On the queer temporalities of the child's "sideway growth" see Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal," in *Curioser. On the Queerness of the Children*, eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 277-315.
[34] Lee, "The Child," 26.

Lee elaborates on the equivalence of the two senses in another passage in which she states that touch and sound are brethren: "the sounding ones of the statues: and all we who are brethren, whether in stone, or sound, or colour, or written word, shall to thee speak in such a way that thou recognise us, and distinguishing us from others; and thou shalt love and believe only in us and those of our kin".[35] By abstaining itself from reproducing the vertical hierarchies of the museum, the formalist child in the Vatican challenged the antiquarian chronologies of art history while it opened up a productive space for Lee to rethink sculpture appreciation as a queer modelling of the self which she continued to probe through her later psychological work.

Miming Statues

During the 1890s, memory started to occupy a vital place in Lee's thinking about aesthetics psychologically and her turn to psychological theories of *Einfühlung* (translated into English in 1909 as "empathy") added another wrinkle to her critique of the historical method.[36] Contemporary psychological aesthetics presented her with a number of experiments that she was able to test in the galleries with Clementina Anstruther-Thomson first, and alone later. Such experiments facilitated a consideration of art as a process of transfer in which the object under the eye of the beholder was invested with physical and mental processes associated with the act of viewing: "we transfer from ourselves to the object not only the physical muscle movement but the thought and emotion which have been accumulated in our minds to that movement".[37] One of the very first statues that Lee examined in her Gallery Diaries (1901-1904) was the Subiaco Niobid at the Terme Museum (now Museo Nazionale Romano). A putative brother of the Niobids discussed in "The Child in the Vatican", the Subiaco Niobid responded to her new interests in psychological aesthetics. "It affects me *topographically*", she writes to explain the necessity to move around the statue: "Of course the mutilation of antiques immensely complicates matters. In this particular statue the *mimetic balance* happens to be magnificently kept, but the *balance* of lines and masses is irreparably lost. In fact I suspect that I feel in myself the pressure — in a sort of attempt to restore — of an imaginary head, just a ball to steady the slew of the figure; even to some slight degree of an imaginary raised arm" (Fig. 2).[38]

Place Figure 2 here.

This passage illustrates the creative way in which Lee used a historical object as a sounding board to test the phenomenon of empathy with sculpture. She seems to respond directly to the possibility of our imagination to complete the movement of the statue by becoming conscious of the way in which our body apprehends its balance. Our sense of movement is affected by the "mimetic balance" of the statue; yet, this is not a literal imitation of the statue's movement, which was irreparably lost with the missing fragments. Lee's experiment is not aimed at an archeological

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[35] Lee, "The Child," 27. The fact that this passage is repeated twice, only slightly altered in the very conclusion of the essay, only adds to the instrumental effect of resonance and relay inherent to Lee's argument.

[36] In 1923 Vernon Lee gives the translation to Edward Titchener. Anstruther-Thomson, *Art and Man*, 73. On the translation of *Einfühlung* in the context of modernist psychology see Susan Lanzoni, "Empathy in Translation: Movement and Image in the Psychological Laboratory," *Science in Context* 25, no. 3 (2012), 301-27.

[37] Vernon Lee, *The Beautiful: An Introduction to Psychological Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 65.

[38] Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 254.

restoration of the statue, but at the translation of aesthetic stimulations into ideated simulations.[39] The incomplete statue of the Niobid brings to mind the Pygmalionic fantasies that Adolf Furtwängler had projected on the mutilated body of the Venus de Milo in 1893 to make her move according to his philological reconstructions of the original posture.[40] However, for Lee, the Subiaco Niobid is not an object to set into motion like a doll; it is instead an agent of empathy that can be reactivated by the beholder.

Lee clarifies that such a statue, because of its incompleteness, is an interesting methodological object to test the difference between actual locomotion and "*empathically* attributed movement".[41] Thus she tries to test Emmanuel Löwy's theory that pre-Lysippian statues were composed from three points of view (*Dreiansichtigkeit*).[42] Löwy implied that the beholder would stand still once they have found the desired point of view. Lee objected to the stillness of Löwy's position and used the Niobid to assess whether the movement that we are induced to "mime" is externally enacted by our body, or occurs internally in our consciousness as an ideated realisation. Her conclusion argues that the lack of a "dramatic" element in the plastic arts, i.e. the impossibility to decipher the action originally performed by the Niobid, only reinforces her opinion that the content of a sculpture should never get in the way of formal appreciation if we are to test the psychology of "inner mimicry".[43] Lee included the concept of "inner mimicry" in her writings only after the publication of "Beauty and Ugliness" (1897), the essay composed from a series of gallery experiments about empathy with Anstruther-Thomson. Derived from Karl Groos' *innere Nachahmung*, the theory of "inner mimicry", for Lee, came to encompass the complexity of ideated realisations of movement which before she had invariably expressed with terms such as "imitation", "mimetic", and "miming".[44] However, "Beauty and Ugliness" also presented the formula "inner motor adjustments", coined by Anstruther-Thomson, which attracted Groos' interest.[45] In spite of the apparent inconsistency of their terminology, Groos deemed "Beauty and Ugliness" of "preeminent interest" and gave it a substantial mention in his psychological study *Die Spiele der Menschen* (1899).[46]

"Beauty and Ugliness" stemmed from an initial consideration of the problem of movement derived from the appreciation of sculpture. The authors immediately discarded the idea that the beholder is actually set to imitate the movement of a statue. Their initial experiments were instigated by Giuseppe Sergi's physiological work according to whom pain and pleasure were not cerebral operations but of the organic life of the "big viscera" (heart and lungs). Thus, Lee and Anstruther-Thomson argued that palpitations and breathing could be used as indicators for the perception of

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[39] Lee had already elaborated on the beauty of fragments in Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness" (Part II), *Contemporary Review* 72 (November 1897), 669-88 (678); see also Lee, "Central Problem of Aesthetics," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 77-151 (108).

[40] Furtwängler proposed his reconstructions of the Venus de Milo in 1893 in a volume translated by Lee's friend, the archeologist Eugénie Sellers, *Masterpiece of Greek Sculpture* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), 378-84.

[41] Lee, "Aesthetic Responsiveness," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 241-350 (254).

[42] Emmanuel Löwy, *The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art* (London: Duckworth, 1907).

[43] Lee, "Aesthetic Responsiveness," 255.

[44] Lee was aware of the problematic inconsistency of the terminology used in the experiments. Lee, "Central Problem of Aesthetics," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 91.

[45] Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness" (Part II), 669-688 (681). Groos' German letters to Lee in fact retain the English expression "*körperliche* Adjustments". Karl Groos to Violet Paget, 15 February 1901. Papers of Vernon Lee, Somerville College Library. All translations of Groos' letters are the author's own.

[46] Karl Groos, *Die Spiele der Menschen* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1899), 424.

agreeable or disagreeable shapes.[47] The elaboration of empathetic response or "bodily resonance" explored in "Beauty and Ugliness" derived mostly from three psychophysiological theories that were being discussed at the time: Theodor Lipp's *Einfühlung*, Karl Groos' concept of "inner mimicry" and the Lange-James theory of bodily emotion.[48] In an article written for the *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik* (1910), Lee clarified that the analysis of the experiments in "Beauty and Ugliness" did not always distinguish between the three approaches.[49] Following the editor Max Dessoir's criticism on her first draft, Lee also explained the importance of self-observation as a key element of her and Anstruther-Thomson's methodology.[50] "Beauty and Ugliness" was the outcome of a distinct division of labour in which Anstruther-Thomson provided the raw data and Lee the theory. When Lipps reviewed the work, he found it unjustifiable that their evidence was based on the empathetic responses of a single person, thus lacking in objectivity[51] I am not interested in proving their theories but in reflecting historically on the conditions of their speculations. Although Lee reclaimed her work as scientific, she also recognized that it had been conducted in a manner very different from other scientific research: "My aesthetics will always be those of the gallery and studio, not of the laboratory".[52]

In reviewing the arguments proposed in "Beauty and Ugliness" in 1912, Lee made a point of remarking that the concept of "miming", used by Anstruther-Thomson in her reports, was perhaps too literal in some instances and required verification to take into account the possibility that movement be realised rather than enacted. Following an invitation from Groos to provide practical examples in which Anstruther-Thomson attached the expression "miming movements", she wrote a long report on the Venus de Milo which is an excellent example of how she conceived the empathic response:

> My connection with her is through my motor impulses and so I feel as much connected with her drapery as with her body; both of them have balance and have movement […] The pressure on my feet on the ground is pressure that I see in the feet of the Statue. The lift up of my body I see done more strongly and amply in her marble body; and the steadying pressure of my head I see in a diminished degree in the poise of the statue's beautiful head. These movements I may be said to imitate, but I should find them equally in a Renaissance monument or a medieval chalice.[53]

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[47] Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, "Beauty and Ugliness" (Part I), 552.
[48] The term "bodily resonance" is used incidentally only once. Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 96.
[49] Following the lukewarm initial responses to "Beauty and Ugliness", Lee decided to address the community of German psychologists in the most authoritative journal of the time. The initial comment from editor Max Dessoir that "[o]ur journal is strictly scientific; pure art-historical works are excluded" suggests a bias towards Lee's alleged disciplinary affiliations. Max Dessoir to Violet Paget, 9 May 1906. All translations of Dessoir's letters are the author's own. Nonetheless, the article appeared as "Weiteres über Einfühlung und ästhetisches Miterleben," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 5 (1910), 145-90. The English translation of the article, with copious footnotes and annotations, appeared in Lee, "The Central Problem of Aesthetics," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 77-151.
[50] "It seems to me that continuous reference to your personal development pushes the subject matter into the background". Max Dessoir to Violet Paget, 7 October 1909. Vernon Lee Correspondence, Somerville College Library.
[51] Lipps Theodor, "Dritter aesthetischer Literaturbericht," *Archiv für Systematische Philosophie* 6, no. 3 (1900), (377–409). Lee, "The Central Problem," *Beauty and Ugliness*, 96-7.
[52] Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*, viii.
[53] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 94.

By comparing the Venus de Milo with a medieval chalice, these experiments rejected the hierarchies of historical chronologies and employed formalist analysis to explore aesthetic continuities rather than artistic differences. As Renate Borsch explains, this implies that "there would be no realm of 'high' art, set-off from life as aesthetes and modernists insisted".[54] At the same time, this passage also represents the aesthetic exchange between two female bodies, Anstruther-Thomson's body becoming sculptural in posture and matter, an aspect that Lee did not fail to notice in real life when she described "[h]er finely chiselled, rather statuesque features, and a certain — I can only call it — virginal expression made one think rather to a very beautiful and modest boy, like some of the listeners of Plato".[55] This comment seemingly turns the relationship between gender inversion and the inversion of bodies and body doubles into a metaphor of flesh and blood. The figure of the boy has been long explored as a code for lesbian subjectivity; the fact that Kit reminds her of one of the boys of Plato's symposium is another example of Lee's queer use of the past.[56]

The collaboration with Anstruther-Thomson was essential for Lee to find a test case from which to obtain data. When Anstruther-Thomson reported back her experiment in the galleries, Lee started to find many correspondence with the psychological literature she was studying at the time. [57]Many scholars have already commented on the eroticisation of their intellectual collaboration, the art gallery becoming the theatre of a mutual titillation.[58] Diana Maltz has been especially critical in describing Anstruther-Thomson as a "performer" who demanded the attention of her lover as well as an upper-class female audience and stating that their literal methods of investigation were "comical in their physicality".[59] But it was not only the gaze of other women that was laid on Anstruther-Thomson but that of experimental psychologists as well. The conversations with Groos about inner mimicry, in particular, give us the opportunity to rethink the relationship between sculpture and sexuality in a way that goes beyond the biographical interpretation of their work on psychological aesthetics as a sublimation of lesbian desire. Instead, I explore the aesthetic scene of inner mimicry and empathy as a queer technology of the self.

In 1901, Lee reprinted the questionnaire that she had originally circulated at the fourth Psychology Congress in Paris (20-26 August 1900) and sent one copy to Groos in Basel.[60] The questionnaire

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[54] Renate Brosch, "'Art Can Do Nothing Without the Collaboration of the Beholder': Vernon Lee's Theory of Aesthetic Response', in *ImageScapes: Studies in Intermediality*, eds. Christian Emden and Gabriele Rippl (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 97-116 (111).
[55] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 8.
[56] On the queer/lesbian boy see Martha Vicinus, "The Adolescent Boy: Fin-de-Siècle Femme Fatale?", in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, 83-106.
[57] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 47.
[58] Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 166-72; Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of "Vernon Lee"* (New York: Garland, 1987*)*; Maltz, 'Engaging "Delicate Brains": From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee's and Kit Anstruther-Thomson's Psychological Aesthetics,' in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 211-29 (212). For a critique of these position see Psomiades, '"Still Burning,"' 29-37; Sally Newman, "The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1-2 (2005), 51-75.
[59] Maltz, 'Engaging "Delicate Brains,"', 225.
[60] Vernon Lee and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson, *Le role de l'element moteur dans la perception esthetique visuelle. Memoire el questionnaire soumis au quatrième congres de psychologie* (Imola: Cooperative Typographique Edit, 1901).

invited psychologists to observe themselves, a method that Groos himself had been interested in using in a psychological laboratory. In *Die Spiele der Menschen*, he had praised the authors of "Beauty and Ugliness", because "they quote a number of observers who, as much from practice as from possession of exceptional gifts, far transcend the limits attained by the average man in self-observation".[61] Groos, in fact, was especially interested in Anstruther-Thomson's vivid descriptions of empathetic responses and suggested that she may be a "motor type" like himself — a categorization that, as Carolyn Burdett has noticed, derived from neurological work conducted by Jean-Martin Charcot and Alfred Binet, "which resulted in distinctions being drawn between individuals' capacity to process sense data".[62]

When Anstruther-Thomson answered Groos' question whether she felt the statue as a representation of a human body, she stressed that she did not perceive the Venus de Milo as a woman, but as "a Force", and proceeded to give an example of inner motor adjustment: "another connection I feel with her is the balance and shifting of my weight from side to side in order to follow her balance".[63] Anstruther-Thomson's mode of self-oblivion (to quote Groos' letter) before the statue points to another kind of presence that engages differently with Victorian body doubles. Operating outside the field of vision, the subject of the statue is no longer recognisable. This abstraction both hides and outs the lesbian narrative based on the mutual observation between the two collaborators/lovers.

However, Groos' letters urged Lee to separate the individual contributions of the two women, and invited Lee to engage with self-observation "to differentiate in a future publication between that which you experience for yourself and that which C. Anstruther-Thomson experiences […]."[64] Indeed, there seems to be a confusion about the assumption that Lee's theories are *only* derived from the observation of Anstruther-Thomson's body. Although it is true that Anstruther-Thomson was instrumental in making Lee turn away from psychological books and engage with the data of aesthetic experience, it is also true that Lee practised self-observation on her own, as demonstrated in the descriptions utilised for the conferences on 'Art and Life' and subsequent publications on psychological aesthetics and empathy theory. Around 1894, Anstruther-Thomson prompted Lee to start "sampling" statues and pictures with tunes and record their bodily responses to objects during their gallery visits.[65] Glimpses of the child in the Vatican reappear in Lee's memories about apprehending the language of statues through sound. Her emphasis on comparing plastic and music harmonies anticipates many modernist experiments on synesthesia. Impressed by Anstruther-Thomson's ability of self-observation, Lee tried to learn by looking at her way of looking at things: "I was learning to see a little with my own eyes and my own reactions".[66]

Vernon Lee's gallery diaries, therefore, record her own attempts to describe the process of "inner mimicry" that she discussed with Groos. However, as I am going to discuss below, these experiments with also represent the formation of a very modern discourse about sexuality that is inherent to the experiment. Upon returning to see the Subiaco Niobid a second time in 1901, Lee

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[61] Groos, *Die Spiele*, 328.
[62] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 74-5. Burdett, 'The Subjective Inside Us', n.p.
[63] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 95.
[64] Karl Groos to Violet Paget, 30 July 1901. Papers of Vernon Lee, Somerville College Library.
[65] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 38. The friend is most likely to be the feminist composer Ethel Smyth who described such sampling in the Vatican with a derisory tone in her autobiography, published after Lee's death. Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next* (London: Longmans and Green, 1940), 160. The episode has been thoroughly commented in Maltz, 'Engaging "Delicate Brains"', 222-24.
[66] Lee, "Introduction," *Art and Man*, 30.

failed to activate any empathetic response.[67] Having insisted that one should forget what the artwork represents, and only focus on how its formal arrangements communicate, Lee also considered the conditions of the experiment as an integral part of the experiment itself. Light, temperature or mood are not disturbances to the empathic process, but conditions of which the beholder becomes conscious. Two years later, on 7 April 1903, Lee paid another visit to the Terme Museum:

> Effect of emotional tone on aesthetic perception. The other day, the first time here (but it was pouring, the light extremely bad, and the rooms were most inconveniently crowded), feeling fearfully depressed […] I not only did not *feel*, but I didn't see 'how beautiful they are' […] To-day, rather tired in body and spirit, but extraordinarily shaken up, (very literally) warmed, vibrating through and through (most literally almost quaking) […] I find I see very easily, even quite slight things, and feel and vibrate to the movement of them — the swing round the Niobid, etc. A slight but perceptible state of palpitation, rapid breathing through the nostrils, no sort of distraction or worry from without — a bit of Bach humming in me.[68]

The gallery exercise allows the body to be plastically reconfigured by empathy and transformed into a series of polymorphous symptoms.[69] But there is nothing necessarily pathological in this body. Abstracted into mere affects, the illegibility of the body should not be confused with invisibility either, as the author is ever present in the text. A music becomes audible in Lee's head. The child from the Vatican returns to remind her of the lateral relation of music to sculpture. Constantly haunted by form, Lee's experiments set up a clear opposition between knowing and becoming: the gallery diaries give no historical information about the Niobid, but they document a series of attempts through which the body of the beholder is continually reshaped.

The Plasticity of Empathy

In Lee's first gallery entry, the Subiaco Niobid staged the problematic relationship between form and content. But Lee initially struggled to *feel* the statue. In a later entry on the same statue, the satisfaction of the empathetic response makes Lee aware of the way other visitors may look at this statue for another kind of satisfaction tinted with sexual undertones:

> I see very well, easily, have no sense of *seeing*, but a strong full sense of *it* (the *Niobid*). *It* is the only nominative. The figure seems to be waning about, thrusting forward, pressing down, hurling up, with a total delightful spiral movement. The pleasure seems to be in the impetuosity of that spiral cast forward of the body. Still, I do not think there is a vestige of pleasure in anything human: I am familiar with such impression about landscape. The surface modelling and patina give me another kind of pleasure, like that of the chest of Titian's *Flora*. I find nothing human in this either, for I am conscious of a negative satisfaction in this surface having no tactile softness and no temperature; the fact of the bystanders having both is on the whole repulsive to me.

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[67] Lee, "Aesthetic Responsiveness," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 257.
[68] Lee, "Aesthetic Responsiveness," in *Beauty and Ugliness*, 299-300.
[69] The role of plasticity in art history has been recently discussed in a panel organised by Rowan Bailey at the 43rd AAH Conference titled *The Power of Plasticity* Loughborough University, 6-8 April 2017.

The whole passage is hinged around "it", highlighted in italics in the original text, which the author informs us is the preferred nominative for what would otherwise appear as a statue representing a mutilated male ephebic youth. The neutral pronoun had a special valence for Anstruther-Thomson who, "in those pre-Freudian days […] went on calling her studies 'trying to find out what IT (viz. a work of art) is *doing*'".[70] Presented as the childish language of an unaccomplished theory, 'it' opens up a series of queer possibilities in Lee's own text. By not saying 'he', she empties the statue of any human trait while, at the same time, takes it away from the gazes of the bystanders who may look at the statue for erotic satisfaction. The formalist language of this passage exposes the exercise of empathy upon the body of the practitioner which is transformed. By expressing her satisfaction in opposition to that of the bystanders, Lee finally sets herself apart from the crowd of visitors, thus altering the sexual economy of display. The gallery experiments did not always confirm or conform to a monolithic ideology of gender in the museum and demonstrate that another narrative was possible.[71]

Once the Niobid has been removed from the heteronormative visual economy of the bystanders, the statue can freely enter the space of a formalist dialogue with other artworks — e.g. *Flora*, who is not a woman either. Statues are the conduit for the beholder's own pleasure to revitalise their body through an erotics of empathy which does not always require a (gendered) object choice. Lee's formalism practices impersonality; yet, the self is still perceived as affect, through its attachment to the materiality of sculpture. Finally, these experiments are also an illuminating instantiation of Foucault's skepticism towards an epistemology of excavation in the work of the contemporary historian: nothing is hidden in the archeological work, for what we are asked to define here are solely "the relations on the very surface of discourse".[72] The affective speech of Lee's gallery diaries represents an archive of feelings that exceeds the parameters of confession and truth. In place of a lack of representation, hers seems like a strategy of disidentification.[73]

My insistence on maintaining a theoretical connection between disidentification and abstraction ultimately appeals to an established tradition in queer formalism. Abstraction has often been considered as a muted expression of homoerotic desire, a "homosexual code", or an "aesthetic minoritizing discourse", but the self-oblivion of empathy also shows the possibility for sexuality to be implicit in erotic desire.[74] In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that modernism's commitment to abstraction has often be interpreted as an alibi: modernist abstract aesthetics functioned like a glass screen that sheltered desires which were too dangerous to be expressed in the open.[75] Abstraction, therefore, corresponded to the sophisticated construction of an epistemology for a coded secret: many artists and art writers used abstraction to camouflage

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[70] Lee, "Introduction," in *Art and Man*, 46.
[71] For a discussion of other examples in which women challenged the male discourse of the museum, see Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).
[72] Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews 1961-1984,* ed. by Sylvère Lotringer (MIT Press: Boston, Mass., 1996), 57-8.
[73] According to José Esteban Muñoz, disidentification "proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture". See his *Disidentifications. Queers of Colour and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
[74] Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 135; Thaïs Morgan, "Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater," *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 3 (1993), 315-32 (316).
[75] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 165-167. Sedgwick writes about Wilde's *Dorian Gray* as 'glass closet' or open secret.

hot desires through cold form. However, Sedgwick's analysis is perhaps too reliant on the opposition between abstraction and figuration. Lee's theories demonstrate that the binary distinction between abstraction and figuration remains an incomplete description for art's relation to empathy.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, empathy theories were also employed by Havelock Ellis to make legible the link between psychological aesthetics and sexology to describe the "psychological anomaly" of what today is called gender dysphoria. British sexological literature was particularly committed to challenging the pathologisation of sexuality, and it is therefore extremely useful for understanding cultural perceptions towards sexual dissidence. In a pioneering article titled 'Sexo-Aesthetic Inversion', published in 1913, Ellis criticised reductionist approaches to transvestitism and argued that German empathy theories by Lipps and Groos could help to explain the means by which individuals who experience "gender inversion" imaginatively imitate the traits they admire in the opposite sex. It is interesting that Ellis did not include Lee in the list of authors discussed in this piece, in spite of knowing her work well through the mediation of his collaborator John Addington Symonds.[76] In his study, Ellis elucidates different types of sexo-aesthetic inversion in which the subjects manifest an "impulse to project themselves by sympathetic feeling into the object to which they are attracted, or the impulse of inner imitation".[77] Freely borrowing from Lipps' definition of *Einfühlung* and Groos' *innere Nachahmung*, which had been popularised to the English readers by Lee, Ellis turned to another type of sexo-aesthetic inversion, which he defines as "sexually abnormal but aesthetically correct"; this was represented by individuals who feel the beauty they see in the opposite gender by empathetically placing themselves in it: "Our emotions, as it were, beat in time to its rhythm".[78] Ellis' utilisation of psychological aesthetics to stress the inner pleasure derived from the imitation of gender stipulates another entwinement between aesthetics and sexuality that runs at a deeper level of affects. The proposition of a rhythmic theory of gender is extremely fascinating for rethinking the relationship between abstraction and empathy that Lee had developed by evacuating the mimetic theory of sculptural representation.

Gillian Beer has convincingly argued that Lee's political and gender nonconformity must be read in relation to her lifelong cautioning against crowd mentality and polarising arguments — two phenomena that she studied carefully in her political writings: "[n]ormalcy for Lee is the great delusion".[79] Lee's work on psychological aesthetics, too, was an attempt to think the self not in terms of stability, but in terms of change and transformation. In her endeavours to eschew sexuality as a category that connotes or denotes desire, Lee reimagined the human being as an erotic bundle of habits that rhythmically take shape through plastic movements. Thus, I attended to Lee's sculptural imagination to tease out the question of what bodies may become when

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[76] John Addington Symonds to Havelock Ellis, 17 January 1893. Quoted in *John Addington Symonds and Homosexuality: A Critical Edition of Sources*, ed. Sean Bready (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 240.

[77] Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Eonism and Other Studies*, quoted in Jana Funke, "Intersexions: Dandyism, Cross-Dressing, Transgender," in *Late Victorian Into Modern*, eds. Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 441-28 (419). I am grateful to Jana Funke for productive discussions of Ellis.

[78] Havelock Ellis, "Sexo-Aesthetic Inversion," (Part II) *The Alienist and Neurologist* 34, no. 2 (1913), 249-279 (276).

[79] Gillian Beer, "The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: Satan the Waster and the Will to Believe," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, eds. Suzanne Raitt and Trudy Tate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107-31 (128).

empathy introduces an abstract relation that, according to David Getsy's formulation of queer formalism, breaks the binds of the allegedly natural discourse of gender, and builds new binds that have the capacity "for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple".[80] Lee's gallery experiments were not intended to recover the historical meaning of statues, but she used ancient sculpture as a tool of self-exploration to learn how to live by the formal rules of a work of art. Reflecting on her encounters with the Niobids across different times in her intellectual path is one way for us to appreciate how she made the aesthetic appreciation of sculpture into a sexual style.

[80] David Getsy, "Capacity," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014), 47-49 (47).